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Defining readiness : for, against, and an appropriate view

Linda Harris
University of Northern Iowa

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Defining readiness : for, against, and an appropriate view

Abstract

The appropriate time to begin kindergarten is no longer simply a matter of chronological age. Developmental readiness, or maturational readiness concern, has caused parents and educators to delay the entry of selected children into kindergarten programs. Some educators look to the developmentally appropriate kindergarten programs, or multi-age grouping in the primary grades, to solve the readiness dilemma.

This study reviews the most recent literature on the subject of readiness. It also looks at the benefits and problems concerning delayed entry. The study attempts to pull together an appropriate view of readiness for parents and early childhood teachers, and offers guidelines for determining readiness.

**Defining Readiness: For, Against
and an Appropriate View**

A Graduate Project

Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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Masters of Arts in Education

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by

Linda Harris

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Charles R. May

March 4, 1999
Date Approved

Graduate Faculty Reader

Peggy Ishler

3/4/99
Date Approved

Graduate Faculty Reader

William P. Callahan

3-4-99
Date Approved

Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction

ABSTRACT

The appropriate time to begin kindergarten is no longer simply a matter of chronological age. Developmental readiness, or maturational readiness concern, has caused parents and educators to delay the entry of selected children into kindergarten programs. Some educators look to the developmentally appropriate kindergarten programs, or multi-age grouping in the primary grades, to solve the readiness dilemma.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps, in our nation's educational history the time has never been more auspicious for a universal definition of the term *readiness*. The blossoming interest in early childhood education, the influx of immigration to America, the focus on inclusion of handicapped students into the regular classroom, and the Goals 2000 statement that "by the year 2000 all children in America will start school ready to learn" (Kagan, 1990, p.272) require a clear definition of readiness. In the past, the definition of readiness has been left to individual school districts and to a variety of interpretations. For purposes of equity and uniformity, it is time to accept a clarification of readiness, and to move past the debate and on to the issues of developing an appropriate view of readiness. This view will meet the needs of the early childhood population today and the curriculum of the developmentally appropriate early childhood program. This study will examine the background of early childhood and readiness, look at the proponents and opponents views of readiness, and offer guidelines for an appropriate understanding of readiness for parents and early childhood teachers.

Background of the Study

The children's garden, or kindergarten, was brought to America over a century ago. It was founded on the work of Friedrich Froebel who emphasized play as an instrument of learning. This emphasis on play brought the kindergarten into a position of

bridging the gap between home and formal schooling (Charlesworth, 1989).

The 19th century brought an understanding that each child brings to the learning situation different abilities which influence learning. The concept of readiness to learn was understood to be a part of this learning. Pestalozzi, 1756-1827, recognized the concept of readiness in his writings (May, Campbell, 1981). G. Stanley Hall began studying the kindergarten in 1895, recognizing the special needs in instruction for the young child (Hill, 1989).

The creation of the kindergarten in America follows a lineage of memorable names and events:

1. Margarethe Schurz, trained in the traditions of Froebel, started the first German speaking kindergarten in America in 1865.
2. Elizabeth Peabody founded the first English speaking kindergarten in America in 1860.
3. Susan Blow established the first public kindergarten in America in 1873.
4. Patty Smith Hill transformed the kindergarten using the ideas of John Dewey.

Kindergartens in America were also begun as philanthropic thrusts of missions, churches, and other egalitarian groups (Hill, 1987). With the large influx of immigrants into the cities of America, social problems and low standards of living caused concerns for these families. The kindergarten provided hope for uplifting the society of the inner city by providing a readiness for schooling for the children of the poor. Kindergartens opened in the slums all over America. Philanthropically supported normal schools trained young women as teachers, who soon discovered their role to be one of social worker as

well as teacher (Hill, 1987).

Influential people then asked the public schools to include kindergartens. The public schools responded by giving them rooms to use, but in many cities, salaries were still paid by philanthropic organizations (Hill, 1987).

When school boards accepted full responsibility for providing kindergartens, many of the areas of home intervention incorporated into the private programs was no longer available. The concept of home intervention by the teacher was not used in the public schools (Hill, 1987).

The kindergarten was not understood by grade teachers for it was looked upon as very sentimental with a strange approach to learning using play; it was something frowned upon by graded teachers. Children passed into first grade with no continuity of work. The kindergarten and grade teachers were trained in different approaches. This situation changed as time passed and the kindergarten was looked upon as a favorable beginning for children (Hill, 1987).

In the past, kindergarten was viewed as an experience of preparation, getting ready for what would follow in the school years ahead. "All the activities and subjects of the primary schools have their foundation laid in the kindergarten" (Hill, 1987, p.14).

Through the early years of the kindergarten there was a growing awareness of the concept of readiness but the term itself was not used in print until the 1920's (May, Campbell, 1981). The idea of readiness itself did not receive major attention until the end of the 1920's when the International Kindergarten Union created a *reading readiness* committee whose mission was to encourage a better understanding of the concept of

reading readiness (Kagan, 1990).

In the 1920's, the term readiness came to be associated with readiness for reading. Historically, readiness has been seen as a fixed standard of physical, intellectual, and social development at a level that would make it possible for a child to meet school requirements and successfully achieve the curriculum content (Crnic, Lamberty, 1994).

Before Sputnik, in 1957, the kindergarten's purpose was to provide an opportunity for young children to have a group experience outside the home. Children were made to feel comfortable at school, learn their address, tie their shoes, learn their phone number, and other beginning learning type activities. Children came to school ready to learn, not necessarily ready to read, and there were few failures (Hill, 1987). Also, academic subjects became prominent in the kindergarten curriculum and the concept of readiness was emphasized even more.

After the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, in 1957, the American public panicked and felt the nation's educational system was falling behind that of the Soviets (Elkind, 1996). Schools responded by moving curriculum down. Within five years of the Sputnik launch the complete second grade curriculum had been moved down to first grade; first graders were expected to accomplish two years of work in one year; and first grade teachers responded by moving parts of their first grade curriculum into the kindergarten (Connel, 1987).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to review and analyze the literature concerning school

readiness. In order to achieve this purpose the following questions will be addressed:

1. What is readiness?
2. What are the views of the proponents of readiness?
3. What are the views of the opponents of readiness?
4. How does delayed entrance into kindergarten affect readiness?
5. How does an appropriate view of readiness assist parents and early childhood teachers in forming guidelines for readiness?

Need for the Study

Preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers, principals, and parents need to have a clear understanding of the term readiness. A child's entry date into kindergarten is determined by these people, and without a clear understanding of what readiness is, it is impossible to make that decision with any degree of confidence. Even though the definition of readiness has changed over time, the concern for readiness has increased (Kagan, 1990, Kagan, 1992).

Limitations of the Study

Because of the vast amount of material available, and a limited amount of time to complete this study, only those sources which applied most to the research were included.

Definition of Terms

The following terms will be defined as they are used in this paper:

Readiness for school: Readiness for school sanctions "... a fixed standard of physical and social development sufficient to enable children to fulfill specific school requirements and to assimilate the curriculum content" (Okon & Okon, 1973, p. 7).

Readiness for learning: Readiness for learning is "... the level of development at which any individual is ready to undertake the learning of specific material, and it is usually defined as the age at which the average group of individuals has the specific capacity" (Good, 1973, p.374).

Maturational readiness: This description of readiness "... draws from both of the other readiness constructs...but also acknowledges that children should be given time to develop according to their individual time clocks" (Kagan, 1992, p. 48).

Developmental kindergarten: Classrooms that are extensions of the activities of preschool. All the activities are developmentally appropriate for each individual child.

Readiness test: Tests given in the spring of the year before the child starts school in the fall. The Gesell and Metropolitan are examples of readiness tests.

Birthdate effect: Children whose birth date is either on or closely follows the determined date children are eligible for school entry and who are seen as youngest in the class or immature because of their birth date.

Prekindergarten class: Classes functioning somewhere between preschool and kindergarten. They are designed to set the social and academic tone for the child entering kindergarten who is not seen as developmentally ready to begin at age five.

Pre-first grade class: A class for the child who has completed kindergarten but has

not done well on the reading readiness testing, and may be emotionally and socially immature. This is often looked on as giving the child an extra year to mature.

The topic of readiness is highly debated in current literature, with many and varied opinions being expressed. The review of literature will examine these views and will extrapolate readiness guidelines for an appropriate view of readiness for parents and early childhood teachers.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A Definition of Readiness

The belief is widely held by kindergarten teachers that there are specific skills and abilities that young children must bring to the school setting to achieve academic success (Espinosa, Thornburg, Matthews, 1997). These specific skills fall under the heading of readiness; yet, there is currently no professional consensus concerning what readiness actually is (Kagan, 1992).

...the idea of ‘readiness’ poses very real challenges, both conceptually and practically. Conceptually, readiness remains poorly defined and variously interpreted. Practically, it is mired in confusion, with practitioners and policy makers advancing widely differing positions regarding it and related issues... (Kagan, 1990, p. 272).

Kagan (1990) wrote “...school readiness as we have understood and used the concept, is a somewhat narrow and artificial construct of questionable merit” (p. 272). One evidence of the confusion regarding the definition of readiness is the continuously changing school entry date (Kagan, 1992).

The three types of readiness this paper will consider are the following:

1. Readiness to learn:

Readiness to learn is regarded as the level of development at which an individual (of any age) is ready to undertake the learning of specific material, and is usually defined as the age at which the average group of individuals has the specified capacity (Good, 1973, p. 146).

Understanding the fluidity of development, readiness to learn applies to all ages.

2. School readiness: School readiness is "... a fixed standard of physical, intellectual and social development sufficient to enable children to fulfill specific requirements and to assimilate the curriculum content" (Okon & Okon, 1973, p. 7). Readiness for school is commonly thought of as reading readiness, and is directed to young children at the pre-kindergarten level. The content of school readiness is more fixed encompassing specific linguistic cognitive skills.

3. Maturationist readiness: The two previous views gave rise to the maturationist theory of readiness. This theory "...draws from both of the other readiness constructs, sanctioning a fixed school-entry standard that children should attain prior to school entry...but also acknowledging that children should be given time to develop according to their individual time clocks (Kagan, 1992, p. 48).

Early justification for readiness came from the theories of Arnold Gesell. Gesell's categorization of the kindergarten child's characteristics, interests, abilities, and readiness by age was well received in kindergarten literature and practice (Wolf & Kessler, 1987).

In the early 1900's, William S. Gray stated that reading was made up of specific readiness skills which are unique to kindergarten; whereas, actual reading is a part of first grade. Kindergarten was a preparation for reading and first grade was the activity of reading itself. This idea soon grew to include writing readiness with the result that eventually the idea of kindergarten as preparation for first grade reading took over and has been the traditional view ever since (Walmsley, 1996).

The decade of the 1970's saw kindergarten classes continuing to focus on the development of school readiness through socialization experiences and learning through play. When readiness was defined, it was in terms of attitude and motivation, not the singling out of specific academic achievements (Charlesworth, 1989).

The 1980's saw a trend toward identification of high-risk children representing all socioeconomic levels, whose readiness for school was questionable. Thus, kindergarten readiness no longer served the function of socialization for future schooling, but evolved into an experience which requires children to be ready upon entry (Smith & Shepard, 1987).

Other views of readiness are that "...readiness is balanced maturity" (Moore, 1975, p. 33), and that readiness is the progressing ability to integrate certain subskills along with the developmental maturity to integrate these subskills into a desired skill (Jensen, 1969). The variety of opinions concerning readiness suggests that there are many aspects affecting readiness to learn. Those aspects are motivation, physical development, intellectual ability, emotional maturity, and health (Kagan, 1990). The capacity of readiness for children is seen as a function of their early learning experiences (Espinosa, Thornburg, Matthews, 1997).

Currently, an emerging construct of readiness has evolved from maturational and chronological approaches. This construct treats all children equally at school entrance and is committed to meeting the needs of all children who enter kindergarten. Thus, the past

idea of readiness as a static set of developmental levels to be met is dismissed, and a new view of readiness, that every child is *ready*, would be used instead (Kagan, 1990).

There are those who support the traditional readiness process as part of the early childhood program. These supporters are known as proponents of readiness.

Proponents View of Readiness

Proponents define readiness as “...the expectation of specific skills and abilities that children should possess prior to school entry” (Drnic, 1994, p. 97). Readiness is defined as a function of IQ , age, background experience of the child, and the stimulation the child has received (Moore, 1979). The biological make-up of the child determines the child’s development (May, D., 1994).

Proponent of readiness believe: (a) learning occurs only in school; (b) readiness is a specific inherent condition within every child; (c) readiness is a condition that can easily be measured; (d) readiness is predominantly a function of time and that some children need more time than others; (e) children are ready to learn when they can sit quietly at a desk and listen to a teacher; (f) children who are not ready for school do not belong in school (Crnic, 1994).

The maturationist view is that “...the biological time table of normal development makes ineffective and unnecessary any attempts to speed up this learning with specific training; however, a wide range of ordinary life experiences is valuable and in fact appears fundamental for optimum school readiness” (Moore, 1965, p. 89). The individual

child's readiness capacity is discerned foremost as a function of the early learning experiences of the child (Espinosa, Thornburg, Matthews, 1997).

For those supporting the readiness construct the relationship of cognitive and conceptual development is indicative of a successful kindergarten experience. Children coming into kindergarten should already possess categorization and discrimination skills and have a sense of spatial relations supporting one-to-one correspondence and various other basic math skills (Spillman & Lutz, 1983, Espinosa, 1997).

It is the belief of many kindergarten teachers that readiness is a vital component of success. They see the skills and abilities the child brings to kindergarten as a yardstick for measuring the child's readiness, rather than something the child will obtain with introduction to the kindergarten curriculum (Crnic & Lamberty, 1994).

Advocates of maturational readiness state that development precedes learning. Development is considered a prerequisite for learning, and holding children out of school until they are developmentally ready is sanctioned, and even encouraged (Kagan, 1992). The burden of proof of readiness lies with the child because readiness is seen as an inherent condition particular to each child.

In addition to the requirement for kindergarten entry, which is most frequently stated as a maturational or chronological age, many school districts also request the achievement of school related skills as measured by a standardized readiness test. The accepted "...specific criteria for readiness for kindergarten includes: (1) chronological age, (2) social-emotional development, (3) physical development, (4) conceptual

development, and (5) language development” (Spillman, 1983, p. 348).

As schools have sought ways to ensure that children who are entering kindergarten are capable of attaining objectives in advance of success in first grade, states and local school districts have developed criteria for use in determining who is ready for kindergarten and who is not (Espnosa, 1997). Readiness testing provides a means for removing children who are not ready for school “...with greater precision than by arbitrary age” (Meisels, 1987, P. 4). Readiness tests measure curriculum-related skills a child already has — those typically prerequisite for a district’s instructional program.

The practice of screening children prior to school entrance, or at the end of the kindergarten year, is an attempt to identify children who will have difficulty in school. Their success is measured against the child’s ability to perform particular standardization achievement or readiness tests. Also, readiness measures cognitive or academic growth, while developmental readiness takes into account cognitive functioning, behavior, physical, emotional, and language development. The perceived ability to cope with the school environment is seen as more important than the specific level of cognitive functioning (Wood, Powell, Knight, 1984).

Gesell believed that children were not biologically ready to learn until they had reached the mental age of six and one half years (Elkind, 1988). It was his premise that readiness screenings were necessary to prevent inappropriate school placement for young children. The Gesell Institute’s position was that students are at their best in school if they begin and are promoted on the basis of developmental age, which could be indexed with

the use of the Gesell School Readiness Test (May, D. & Welch, 1986). The Gesell Test was developed in 1965 and although carefully normed and widely used, has never been validated (Wood, 1994, Meisels, 1987, May, D., 1994).

“Early childhood education must take into account the development of the child’s brain, vision, hearing, perception, emotions, sociability, family and school relationships, and physical growth” (Moore, 1965, p. 91). Several school problems, including emotional disturbance, learning disabilities, minimal brain damage, and under achievement, may be the direct result of asking children to perform in school at levels for which they are not developmentally prepared (May, D., 1994). Research has shown that this maturing of all areas of readiness is in place by the ages of eight-to-ten years (Moore, 1965).

While those who view readiness in a positive light have held the mainstream for many years, educators who view readiness in a different light are gaining credibility in recent years. They maintain an opponent’s view of readiness.

Opponents View of Readiness

From the perspective of the school district, a child is ready for kindergarten if he successfully meets pre-established expectations set by the district. From the child’s perspective, when he reaches the legal age, he is ready (Freemon, 1990). Every child, except in the most severe instances of abuse, neglect, or disability, enters school ready to learn (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1990). Currently early childhood is seldom considered on its own terms, as adults have come to look at this

stage of life as a time for intervention and school readiness. To some educators, readiness is viewed as preparation for later stages of life (Elkind, 1996).

Is readiness a quantity to be measured? Opponents of readiness argue that "...it is not possible to make highly accurate assessments of school readiness" (Shepard, 1986, p. 84). Readiness tests are not an accurate picture of a child's developmental status, but resemble a snapshot portraying one moment in time (Kagan, 1992). Teachers are urged not to use standardized tests as the criteria for school entrance (Bredekamp & Shepard, 1989). The parent as an information source is also important in the decision of child placement in school (Freeman, 1990).

The accuracy of current readiness tests has been questioned and found to be sufficiently inaccurate for use in removing children from their peer group. The Gesell Readiness Test and the Metropolitan Readiness Test are moderately good tests but do not have very high predictive validities (Shepard, 1986). While the Gesell test claims to measure developmental age, it is basically measuring IQ (Jensen, 1969), yet research has proven it to be "...effective for predicting success or failure in kindergarten" (Wood, Powell, Knight, 1984, p. 11). Other research sees the Gesell test as without reliability and untrustworthy in identifying and placing children (Meisels, 1987). The Metropolitan is among the technically best measure available, however it is not advertised for the purpose of sorting children into ready and unready groups — it is intended to help teachers organize instruction (Ravitch, 1985).

Developmental placement has a downside. The tests which are available to

measure readiness have not been shown to be consistent and accurate (Meisels, 1987).

The major difficulty with placement using developmental readiness is the *hit rate*.

Actually how reliable is the readiness test? Can the scores be attributed to the differences in the child's performance as opposed to errors in measurement (NAEYC, 1988)? Some researchers would agree that this is true, especially in the case of children who are mislabeled "special needs" because of the results of the readiness testing (Wood, 1984).

The paradox of readiness screening is that it screens out children who would most benefit from the quality services of the kindergarten (Kagan, 1990). Children denied kindergarten entry based on a readiness screening score could be unfairly judged as not ready for school and lose the opportunity and right to an education. For the child deemed not ready for school and placed in an extra year program separated from his or her peers, or told to stay at home another year, intervention services that could benefit the child may not be available (May, D., 1994). School readiness screening and extra year programs may also obstruct the inclusion of children with disabilities. If a school is unable to accommodate the curriculum needs of children identified as unready for the demand of school, how is the school going to adapt to meet the needs of children with special needs in the regular class? The accepted policy of segregating children who are identified as not ready for school creates an environment which is contradictory to the inclusion movement. Readiness screening also identifies a disproportionate number of poor and minority children who are unready for school because of the correlation with socioeconomic status (Shepard, 1988). Historically, many children have been diagnosed

as unready for kindergarten, and they have been kept-out of school. A disproportionate number of boys has been evident, especially those with late birthdays (Kagan, 1990).

In the statement that a five or six-year-old child is not ready to learn lies the underlying fact that the child is in reality not ready for the specific curriculum of the school. Those children who fail the screening process are seen as inadequate because they do not fit the system. Thus, a moral choice has been made to serve the needs of the system rather than the needs of the child (Shepard & Smith, 1988). To determine that a child is not ready for school rather than the school is not ready for the child, enables administrators to remove from the educational flow children at varying levels of development. Thus, the child is seen as the problem instead of the school (Holloman, 1990). Having taken this route, schools have developed a variety of ways to remove less ready children from the educational mainstream, all of who fall into the category of retention. The pre-kindergarten, developmental kindergarten, buy-a-year, *beginndergarten*, transition room, readiness room, pre-first grade, academic-redshirting, and repeating the regular kindergarten program are all means which are suppose to provide the extra year of development necessary to be successful in school. However, "...evidence indicates that kindergarten retention does not boost achievement by giving children an extra year to grow" (Shepard & Smith, 1988, p. 142).

With children who are less ready skimmed off through the screening process, kindergartens have become increasingly sophisticated with a population of old children, "...this phenomenon being dubbed the 'graying of kindergarten' or the 'miniaturization of

first grade” (Kagan, 1992, p. 50). Kindergarteners are immediately immersed in academics (Nason, 1991). This practice has resulted in one fourth to one third of U.S. kindergarten students being retained (Billman, 1988). Administrators have created a model which places the responsibility for school failure on the child — a model which continues to flourish in schools who support the school readiness philosophy (Kagan, 1992).

Child developmentalists operate within the theory that there is no such thing as not being ready for school (Charlesworth, 1989). Taking a Vygotskian perspective, opponents of readiness believe that children are ever-ready learners who are continuously growing and stimulated by the intellectual life around them. Children thrive in environments where adults and peers encourage and enhance learning (Kagan, 1992). Readiness is seen as “...a condition of the institution, not the individual” (Kagan, 1990, p. 274).

Looking at readiness from a neurobiological perspective, readiness is not seen as a single point in time. Readiness is seen as a continuum throughout the school experience in which coming to school ready to learn is an obsolete concept (Petersen, 1994). Support for a specific chronological age which is more favorable than another in predicting readiness is unfounded (Spillman, 1983). The NAEYC (1990) quoted in their position statement on readiness that “the only legally and ethically defensible criterion for determining school entry is whether the child has reached the legal chronological age of school entry. While arbitrary, this criterion is also fair” (p. 22).

Readiness opponents believe that "...the maturational view has fallen from grace" (Kagan, 1990, p. 274). While the maturationist view had its beginnings in dissatisfaction with chronological age as the sole standard of school entry, its adoption as the single determining basis for school entry has left a trail of unintended and unacceptable consequences (Kagan, 1992).

Schools, in the view of readiness opponents, need to have strong beliefs concerning developmentally appropriate programs, and understand that all children have the right to enter school and be served by the best educational program possible (Holloman, 1990). The NAEYC has stated, "It is the responsibility of the educational system to adapt to the developmental needs and levels of the children it serves; children should not be asked to adapt to an inappropriate system. No public school program should deny access to children of legal entry age on the basis of lack of maturational 'readiness'" (1986, p. 16).

The question of delayed entry as a remedy for the readiness dilemma is basically a question for proponents of readiness; yet, those who oppose the traditional view of readiness also deal with the question of delayed entry.

Delayed Entry

Using the principles of the Gesellian philosophy schools changed their entrance age dates. The thought behind this was that if the child were older there would automatically be fewer school problems (Gredler, 1980, p. 9).

The past has seen an increasing number of typically educationally astute parents keeping their children home an extra year before beginning kindergarten. This has been an attempt to alleviate the perceived problem of the child being the youngest in the class (Connell, 1987, Holloman, 1990, Crossner, 1991). Research by Sweetland and DeSimone in 1987 determined there was a definite association between early age at school entry and lower academic achievement. The youngest children performed at a lower level on measures of academic achievement than did their peers who were older. Kinard and Reinherz (1986) determined that using chronological age alone as a determinant for kindergarten entrance may result in children being accepted into school who are not cognitively or emotionally ready. Their study found that although the youngest children in the class were not failures, they did score lowest on cognitive ability at school entry. Children who are less bright, but older and developmentally more mature were found to be capable of doing more with the ability they had than the younger, brighter students (Uphoff & Gilmore, 1986).

The early screening of kindergarten students has resulted in a misdirection of the curriculum. Teachers are determining how and what to teach by the need for their students to score well on various standardized tests, a practice that drains instructional time. These high-stakes testing practices pressure schools to retain low-achieving students, or place them in special extra year classes, thus taking out large numbers of students from the mandated testing programs which measure a district's performance (May, D., 1994). As younger and younger children are required to be tested, evaluation

instruments are developed for younger and younger children. "The 1964 Stanford Achievement Test dropped into kindergarten on the 1973 edition and even lower on the 1982 edition (May, D., 1994, p. 295). As it has been done in athletics, parents have elected to delay their children's entry into school by "red-shirting" (Frick, 1986, p. 9) them. This has been their response to curriculum which they have viewed as demanding and inappropriate. For children who are screened out of kindergarten entry school districts have requested that developmentally immature children spend an extra year at home or enroll in an extra year program. These choices delay school entry.

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching conducted a national survey of more than 7,000 kindergarten teachers and "...found that more than a third, 35% of all entering kindergarten students were judged as *not ready* for school" (Espinosa, 1997, p. 120) in the fall of 1990. Children who are not developmentally ready to cope with school have a dramatic increase in the possibility for failure. Research presented by Uphoff and Gilmore (1986) revealed that:

1. Chronologically older children in a grade tend to receive many more above-average grades from teachers than do younger children in that grade.
2. Older children also are much more likely to score in the above-average range on standardized achievement tests.
3. Younger children in a grade are far more likely to have failed at least one grade than are older children.
4. Younger children in a grade are far more likely to have been diagnosed as learning disabled than are older students.
5. Academic problems of younger children who were developmentally unready at school entrance often last throughout their school careers and sometimes even into adulthood (p. 11)

The birthday effect has created interest, for children who enter school emotionally or cognitive immature present a risk for problems which could lead to persistent school failure or maladjustment (Kinard & Reinherz, 1986). "The birthday effect means that younger children in the group generally have a slightly more difficult time academically in kindergarten and even throughout the elementary years" (Freeman, 1990, p. 31).

Crosser (1991) determined in a study of summer birthdays that males of similar levels of intelligence with summer birthdays tended to be academically advantaged by delaying kindergarten entrance one year. The greatest area of advantage was in reading. Females who delayed kindergarten entrance one year showed no advantage in reading or math, but overall were advantaged as shown by composite scores on standardized tests. Several other studies reveal that the youngest children do not score as well as older children in academic achievement and adjustment (Freeman, 1990).

Other studies have shown that there is "...little or no effect on academic achievement that can be attributed to the birthday of a student" (Dietz & Wilson, 1985, p. 94). Studies have also shown that there are differences because of the age of the children at school entry, but by third grade there were no significant differences in other academic performance or adjustment to school. The birthday effect seems to disappear by third grade (Freeman, 1990). Crosser (1991) points out that "the existing knowledge base for decision making about school entrance age for summer birth date children is not particularly strong: (p. 145). Study has shown that youngest students not only succeed, but excel. The age difference caused by the birthday effect may affect a specific

child negatively, but should not be seen as a major contributor to student failure (DeMeis & Stearns, 1992).

Research is contradictory on the issue of youngness. While it may be true that children who are the youngest in the class do catch up by grade three, the years between kindergarten and third grade are when children experience failure and are often labeled as special needs (a label that may be carried with them throughout their entire school career). To answer these questions school systems have offered a flawed solution — raise the entrance age. As well intentioned as this logic may be it is not without problems (Charlesworth, 1989). The youngness dilemma is relative, not absolute. Within any given group of kindergarten children there will always be some children who are younger than others. A new group of youngest children is created when the entrance age is raised. The youngness effect is not because of absolute age but is an outcome of the relative standing of a particular child within his or her peer group (Freeman, 1990).

When entrance age policies have responded in change to the increased demands of schooling, it has been inevitable that the new cut-off dates bring discussion about the lack of readiness of the youngest children. It is ironic that these raised entrance age standards have resulted in escalating standards as curriculum adjusts to the older student (Shepard & Smith, 1988).

Shepard and Smith (1988) have given several arguments against raising the entrance age to eliminate the problem of youngness. First, raising the entrance age is not a new concept. It has been tried several times before and has failed to produce a

permanent solution. As the entrance age is raised, teachers and curricula accommodate to the new norm. Second, research on within-grade age effects revealed that the detriment of youngness is slight and disappears by third grade or earlier if individualized instruction is utilized. Third, raising the entrance age only results in the creation of a new youngest group, and fourth, it delays the availability of public education. The burden of raising the entrance age falls most heavily on poor and minority students.

Normal differences in children have not been recognized by the school district policy boards. The result has been the placement of a rigid schedule of growth, a timetable of development children must be attuned to. Physical characteristics of children not ready for school include tiring easily, frequent minor illnesses, and inconsistent perceptualization both visually and auditorily. Socially and emotionally these children have few friends and remain on the fringe. They relate and play better with younger children, may be withdrawn, or loners, or daydreamers. They are quiet and conform to expectations others set for them. Cognitively their work may be average or low, while IQs are high. Not-ready-children tend not to think for themselves (Hammond, 1986).

The expectations teachers hold for younger students are low, especially if the younger student is a male. In a class that is usually designed for the older child, the younger child is automatically thought of as a problem for instruction (Gredler, 1980). Delayed entry has led to the typically aged kindergartner seeming less ready in comparison to older children who are capable of mastery of higher level curriculum. The typical kindergarten child is identified as unready and requested to delay entry, thus

allowing the curriculum standards to continue to escalate (May, D., 1994).

In any kindergarten the variance in age can be at least two years (May, D., 1986). With the continuance of children being admitted to kindergarten once each year the likelihood there will be at least a year's difference in stages of development between the least mature and the most mature children will remain (Frick, 1986).

The question of delayed entry would be one which did not require an answer if kindergarten programs were developmentally appropriate and multi-age grouping in the primary grades were a reality. Youngness would not be an issue, just as being oldest would not be an issue. With each child's individual needs being met, and development of the child beginning where the child is, there would be no need for delayed entry, and every child who comes to school would have the opportunity to learn (Connell, 1987).

Using the information from both the proponents and opponents view it is possible for parents and teachers to form an appropriate view of readiness that can help establish guidelines for readiness.

Guidelines for Readiness

The problems of differential readiness have increased because of current educational reforms and the push to raise standards of education (Shepard & Smith, 1986). Early childhood is a time of rapid intellectual growth which varies in individual children. Some children gain the mental abilities described by Piaget as concrete operations by age four, others at ages six or seven (Elkind, 1996). Because of the age span

in readiness there is currently emerging a more refined construct of readiness. This has been created from the strengths of the maturational and chronological approaches and utilizes the theory of Vygotsky, that children are ever ready learners and need adults and peers to scaffold their learning. Instead of delaying school entrance, schools should be ready for *all* children (Kagan, 1992).

There is general agreement that reconceptualizing readiness relies on taking into consideration the interrelations among several unexplored influences. These influences are the following:

Biological and health foundations for readiness to learn, developmental characteristics of all children (beyond pre-academic abilities), conceptual factors predominantly involving family and school issues, the role of culture and diversity in readiness, the nature of atypical or exceptional children's characteristics in relation to readiness, and lessons from early intervention and measurement efforts that inform the readiness construct (Cronic & Lamberty, 1994, p. 99).

These are all influences that strongly affect the construction of a reconceptualization of readiness.

A new construct of readiness also should manifest equity. First, such a construct should provide equity of access. Chronological age should be used as the primary entry standard for young children. Second, it should provide equity of assessment with an effort to improve the link between effective assessment and effective instruction. Third, a new construct of readiness should make available equity of standards and supports with uniform standards of kindergarten facilities throughout the country. Certification standards and salaries should also be equivalent to teachers of other grades (Kagan,

1990).

The need has been presented for a clear and defensible construct of readiness which has the flexibility to individualize. Instead of individualizing assessment before kindergarten entry with homogenized services after school entry, the process is in need of reversal. The entry standards need homogenization "...so that all children...enter school at a chronological time, then we need to individualize services to match children's needs after entry" (Kagan, 1992, p. 51). Following this plan the great majority of kindergarten age children will approach developmentally appropriate kindergarten at an age appropriate time (Kagan, 1992).

The National Educational Goals Panel has suggested a comprehensive definition of readiness that has its roots in developmental orientation, cognitive, maturational, and Vygotskian theory. The "...essential and integrated domains were (a) physical well-being and motor development, (b) social and emotional development, (c) approaches toward learning, (d) language use, and (e) cognitional and general knowledge" (Kagan, 1992, p. 50). Readiness is seen as a cumulative construct drawing its definition from family, church, health-care providers, and social service institutions. Successful efforts to ready children for school need to be multidimensional (Kagan, 1990).

A workable solution to the readiness problem will rely on teachers, not policymakers and predetermined programs (Shepard & Smith, 1986). Training teachers in providing child-centered, developmentally appropriate programs that meet children's needs would insure all children benefit from a successful kindergarten experience, thus

eliminating kindergarten failures (Nason, 1991). The added dimension of multi-age grouping would accommodate the child's biological clock not simply the child's chronological age, as the primary factor for instruction. At some point all children will have the opportunity to be the oldest and most mature (Charlesworth, 1989, Elkind, 1987, Connell, 1987).

Kindergarten can be an environment where children are treated with respect and individual differences are viewed as positive rather than as negative attributes (Freeman, 1990). However, whatever criteria are used to predict readiness, it will always be relative (May, D., & Welch, 1986).

Guidelines for parents, if followed, can insure the child will enter school ready to learn; however, depending on the readiness policy of the school district and the type of readiness testing used, the child could still be a questionable starter for the kindergarten year.

Teachers who are committed to a developmentally appropriate kindergarten program see all children coming to school at age five as ready learners. The commitment to that program must carry through the early elementary years, or the secure beginning to learning is lost. Those teachers whose guidelines follow the traditionalist or maturationist view of readiness see sequential steps in development as the requirement for successful school entrance.

The guidelines for parents which are given would seem to fit both views of kindergarten entrance and readiness. It is the interpretation of individual readiness, which

is left to the district policy on readiness and their philosophy of the kindergarten program, which may vary.

For parents the concept of readiness as a whole can be confusing and misleading. The academic content of the word readiness presents an academic connotation. The term implies much more, for parents can nurture their children's readiness for kindergarten in a variety of ways. Parents can spend time conversing and listening to the children which sends the message that the parent values the child's ideas, opinion, and thoughts. Reading books together and making available creative materials, to use alone or with the family, are important readiness activities. Parents can help their children become aware of the world around them and expose them to a variety of music, art, and drama. Allowing children to take part in experiences on their own is a part of readiness activities for parents. Play groups, Sunday School classes, etc. are available usually at no charge to parents and allows some separation time. Helping children to develop their own unique personalities requires limited television time and plenty of indoor and outdoor play. Parents can realize the need for the development of independent skills in dressing and basic hygiene, and assist in helping their children to learn their phone numbers, addresses, and full name. Parents can help their children develop responsibility by making sure they clean up after a task or after playtime (Walmsley & Walmsley, 1996).

The decision to start kindergarten will be based on varying criteria depending on the school district the child will attend. For the parent who is concerned with the question of whether to start their child in kindergarten, there are questions that need to be

answered.

What is the underlying philosophy guiding the school's approach to kindergarten?

The goals of the kindergarten program should be stated, along with a description of how the program is organized and presented. It is also important to have an overview of the total primary program, including the relationship of the kindergarten to the first grade.

What are the specific recommendations and expectations for incoming kindergarteners? Many schools have established readiness criteria which are the basis for readiness screening. The readiness test results may or may not be available to parents. If pre-first or transitional rooms are an option, parents may be notified that their children have qualified for this alternative which is based on the readiness screening. Information concerning readiness screening and its potential use should be available to parents upon request.

Is there a faculty list available which includes qualifications and years of experience? If not, these items should be included in the kindergarten entrance material (Walmsley & Walmsley, 1996).

CHAPTER 3

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The purpose of this study was to review the literature concerning the concept of readiness as it applies to school entrance at the kindergarten level. The following questions were addressed:

1. What is readiness?

Readiness is a broad term that encompasses different concepts. Readiness to learn, maturational readiness, and readiness to begin school have traditionally been encapsulated in an understanding of readiness as preparedness for beginning kindergarten. While the readiness terms have different connotations, they are used within the general definition of readiness. Traditionally readiness has included such things as the child knowing their name, address, phone number, color identification, object identification, coping with separation from parent, and attention span.

2. What are the views of the proponents of readiness?

Proponents of readiness believe that readiness is a measurable, inherent condition in every child. They also believe that readiness is a function of time and that some children need more time than others to develop readiness skills. Cognitive and conceptual development is indicative of a successful kindergarten experience with development proceeding learning.

3. What are the views of the opponents of readiness?

Opponents of school readiness believe that it is not possible to accurately measure a child's readiness, and that current readiness tests may not be accurate in their measurement of a child's cognitive ability. Opponents believe that stating a child is not ready to begin school is actually a statement that a child is not ready for the specific curriculum of the school, or that he/she does not fit the system. Opponents believe that every child is ready to learn and to begin school at the age appropriate time. It is the schools that are not ready to meet the child's developmental needs.

4. How does delayed entrance into kindergarten affect readiness?

Maturation theory has influenced the concept of delayed entry. For parents who fear the prospect of their child being the youngest child in the class, thus falling behind academically, delayed entry has become an option. The perceived birthday effect (those children with summer birthdays who will be young compared to others in the class when school begins in the fall) has shown to have little effect on a child's academic performance by grade three, but the years of failure and insecurity until grade three offer an area of concern for teachers and parents. Youngness is relative. No matter what the cut-off date for school entry, there will always be those who are youngest in the class. The effect of delayed entry into kindergarten has resulted in the "graying" of the kindergarten population as the maturity level of the children is raised, and the curriculum level is also raised to meet the challenges of the more mature kindergarten student.

5. How does an appropriate view of readiness assist parents and early childhood teachers in forming guidelines for readiness?

A new construct of readiness is emerging from the strengths of maturational and chronological approaches and the theory of Vygotsky that children are always ready to learn and can do so with the assistance of peers and teachers who scaffold their learning to meet the child's individual learning needs. This view of readiness also takes into consideration such things as children's characteristics, conceptual factors, the role of culture and diversity, equity of standards and supports, and developmentally appropriate kindergarten programs. A child's individual assessment would occur after the child enters school, not before, and individual differences would be viewed as positive instead of negative attributes. Readiness is a cumulative construct, drawing from a child's background of family, church, social interactions, and cognitive skills. Parents and teachers should form guidelines using these readiness concepts.

The concept of readiness as the achievement of specific developmental stages was founded on the research of Piaget, Gesell, and Freud. Their views have long dominated the formation of school entrance and readiness testing. In recent years a new construct of readiness has formed around the work of such authors as Vygotsky and the later writings of Piaget. The view of readiness as a "...condition of the institution, not the individual." (Kagan, 1990, p. 274) is emerging — a construct of readiness flexible enough to individualize. The question of delayed entry is alleviated with the school centered in developmentally appropriate teaching, ready to meet the needs of the child at whatever

level of development he/she is entering the classroom.

Conclusions

In conclusion, there clearly needs to be a clarification of and unified approach to the concept of readiness; one which would serve in the best interest of the early childhood population.

The following conclusions were made from this study:

1. The current method of determining school entrance varies from school district to school district. A more unified approach to the readiness issue is needed.
2. The majority of traditional readiness testing narrowly profiles the five-year-old kindergarten entrant. Broader readiness guidelines are needed to adjust to a more developmentally appropriate early childhood program.
3. Delayed entry remains an option for parents. While research shows that the effect of youngness in a child's academic achievement disappears by grade three, the effects of youngness during the early years can have lasting affects on a child's school career in the form of labeling, retention, disassociation from peers, and academic achievement in some cases. The youngness dilemma will always be a relative one — raising the entrance age fails to do what it purports to do.

4. A reconceptualization of readiness is emerging. Preparing the school for the child, not the child for the school, is the way to achieve an individualization of readiness. Thus, the teacher should enter school ready to learn about the child.
5. Parents and teachers can work together to prepare the child for successful kindergarten entrance, ensuring the child approaches kindergarten ready to learn.

It is clear that a resolution to the confusion surrounding readiness will take time, but evidence is growing that a substantial shift in the approach to school readiness is gaining favor.

Recommendations

Broadening the definition of readiness will enhance the educational opportunities for beginning students, but implementation of this new perspective of readiness will require teacher training and a unique readjustment of current early childhood teaching practices and enrollment policies. Continued research and study of developmentally appropriate teaching practices will be of value in determining how effective developmentally appropriate teaching methods are in the later academic life of the child.

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